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ABSTRACT

This is a fictional dialogue intended to honor Jim Kingman and David Leary, both professors of history who retired after long careers at Pasadena City College in California (PCC). The dialogue hypothesizes the observations of both men as they look on the honorary gold plates of previous retirees that decorate the wall of a PCC public dining hall. The men discuss sentiments about having their own names added to the wall and philosophize about educational policy, institutions, traditions, the history department, teacher-student relationships, and community college education. The two marvel at the generations of students who will continue to pass through the halls of an institution where both men have contributed years of hard work. Of particular interest in the paper is a debate on the different approaches to teaching and studying history, and the role each has in ascertaining the truth about human nature. Jim is the voice of subjectivity, advocating the importance of art, poetry, literature, and individual perceptions in the college curriculum, while Dave takes a more disinterested approach, and is a bit more skeptical. Together they remember their colleagues, common experiences, and the many facets of scholarly life. (AS)

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Jim and Dave:
A Dialogue

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Jim and Dave : A Dialogue
by Bob Doud

Jim Kingman and David Leary are professors of history who are about to retire after long careers at Pasadena City College. This is a fictional dialogue written with the intent of honoring them on their retirement from PCC. The ideas and opinions in this dialogue belong solely to the author and are in no way imputed to the real Jim and Dave.

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Jim: What a beautiful spring day this is, Dave. And here we are indoors, gazing at the golden plates on the red bricks of the Circadian Room at PCC. We sit like two skinny reeds among our portly colleagues.
Dave: Yes, I pride myself on never having been seen eating anything by any of my colleagues in all thirty-seven years of my tenure at PCC. As a matter of fact, this is the first time I've ever been in this dining area.

Jim: Well, Dave, it's the first time for me in the dining area as well. I am a gourmet chef, and save my appetite for when I cook by myself at home, wearing my ribbon and medallion from the Cordon Bleu in Paris.
Dave: I've heard that the reason you are so thin is that you are so little pleased by the things eaten by others of less refined taste.

Jim: Dave, you are correct, but now, tell me why you are looking at these bricks which are covered with the names of retired comrades.
Dave: Jim, I suspect you are here for the very same reason I am here: to see the place where our names will be next year, and forever! An institution like PCC is liable to last an exceedingly long time.

Jim: But, Dave, history is not made of institutions. It is made of real people, human beings of flesh and blood. It is made of the drama and poetry of real lives, agonizing and rejoicing together, consoling and congratulating each other, feeling the feelings that flavor and season every life.
Dave: Jim, you are perhaps giving way to the sentimentalism of the moment. You know that what lasts is what has been planned, what has been translated from mere enthusiasm into bricks and mortar, glass and steel, policies and procedures that will last over time because they are reasonable. I hate to disagree, Jim, but history really is made of institutions.

Jim: Dave, they will never be able to capture what you and I have meant to PCC in a single red brick bearing a small golden plate with our name and department inscribed on it.
Dave: Jim, all we will be to people in a few short years is whatever that plate says. The people who knew us will retire, and all that will be left of us will be a few gossipy rumors, a few short tales of deeds that never really happened. These deeds will be distorted in

every retelling of our stories until the stories, retold ever less frequently, are never told again.

Jim: Look, Dave, there's the brick of Kennon Miedema, former department chair of Social Sciences, for years an instructor of history. I hear he still lives in the neighborhood and is writing the history of horse and jockey relations in the Santa Anita area.
Dave: No, Jim, you have it wrong. Ken does live in the area, but he is writing the history of California bungalow construction and preservation in the Pasadena area.

Jim: And there's the brick of John Ellett. Remember John? He moved far away soon after retirement, to Carthage, Missouri, to experience first hand the life along the Mississippi that he had so loved to teach about for dozens of years.
Dave: Yes, I remember him, and the fine collection of farming tools he had. He would bring those tools to class and show them to students who thought they were so primitive, quaint, and difficult to use.

Jim: No doubt students learned something of pioneer life by looking at those tools and actually handling them.
Dave: It seems that Ken Miedema and John Ellett were not only instructors in history, but are now part of history themselves. You don't have to be well known to be part of history.

Jim: I agree. I think that monuments like these bricks are symbols pointing to pieces of history which they themselves can never fully preserve, much less tell it to future generations.
Dave: It's too bad these walls mean so little to us until we are about to go away ourselves. It's not exactly that one wants to be remembered, but that one wants to have contributed something lasting.

Jim: Even if you have a brick and an inscription, there's no saying that you contributed anything lasting.
Dave: Yet these bricks are here. It says that a sense of tradition is valuable even if we don't know the details of what the tradition contains.

Jim: Tradition is all about continuity, the passing on of the truth, whatever that is, and the passing of what we know from generation to generation.
Dave: Sometimes I think that history is a series of discontinuities. Well-planned events that never led to anything else of importance, and quick decisions that set a pattern for the distant future. History is basically discontinuous, a matter of shocks and adjustments, don't you think?

Jim: What about the Seventy-fifth anniversary, the jubilee of PCC? Is the PCC tradition worth very much at all? To most people it's just parades, sock hops, and football games. What they remember about the place are perhaps not the most important things that went on here.

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Dave: Yeah, there's a difference between what ordinary people remember and what is of historical importance. For all those years, day after day, instructors and students tried to make something important happen in their classrooms. If you're a teacher, you get to say to your classes what you think is most important about each topic, you know, within the context of the material being taught. Is that making a difference?

Jim: So, the jubilee is sort of like the bricks. It's only a symbol of all that happened. People learned in different ways. Some, because of the teaching. Some, in spite of the teaching.
Dave: Some, inside the classroom. Some, outside the classroom. Don's knockplain old good memories; they get us through some tough times in life.

Jim: But these people learned something here. We taught and they learned.
Dave: And we can't say exactly what the connection between teaching and learning really is.

Jim: History is in the details, the putting together of corroborated facts. It's what really happened that makes history.
Dave: I think rather that history is in the broad sweeps; it's in the trends. Understanding the meaning of events is often more important than the events themselves.

Jim: After all these years, Dave, I know that chronology is what it's all about. Finding the actual sequence of events is what history is all about.
Dave: I think it's more about the importance of certain events, figuring out what was really important and what was not – that's what history is about.

Jim: People are mostly passive in history. Things happen to them; they don't make things happen. Events make people; people themselves have little to say about what happens to them.
Dave: *Au contraire*, Jim. Persons make events happen. The decisions of great persons determine the course of world history.

Jim: It's as Herodotus said, Dave. History is about peoples, and peoples each have their own uniqueness. Different peoples have different characteristics, and nations and states are what they are because of the people that are in them. The trick in writing history is to tell the story of the people beneath all the different events that happen.
Dave: Not really so, Jim. There are definite laws that determine human progress; the goal of history is, as Thucydides seemed to say, to discover these laws. Human life is going to follow these laws of history as each empire rises and falls. We ride them to our doom.

Jim: No, Dave; good history is written as the Roman historian Livy wrote it. History serves the empire by finding out what the values of each subjugated nature are, and then respecting those values as much and as far as you can. That's the way to rule, if you're a Roman emperor.

Dave: That's hardly the case. Tacitus was the better historian. The empire is always correct, because the victorious empire is the side that writes the history books. The emperor forces his will and values on others. You go along or you don't survive. You can't make an empire by respecting the values of vanquished peoples.

Jim: You know, we've studied too much of wars and politics. It's the daily life of the people, family life and social structures, that's important.
Dave: Yes, but don't you think that the way power is set up, maintained, and exchanged between states and empires is more important than the life of little people?

Jim: What really tells about people is art, poetry, and literature. That sort of thing. History needs to be humble – it's just the background, not the main event in human understanding.
Dave: I think it's the other way around. History is important – it contains the truth about human nature. The things you mention – art, poetry, music, the rest of literature – these things are only examples of things produced by history along the way.

Jim: Don't you think, Dave, that it's the job of history to tell us how to be human? History is best understood as an organizing principle, or set of principles, behind the disciplines called the Humanities.
Dave: We disagree again, Jim. History at its best is more like the Sciences than anything else. It is a disinterested way of ascertaining truth; overstressing the feelings, values, and emotional expressions of people in every age can become a distraction from finding out what really happened.

Jim: What really happened is what people felt when what was happening was happening. Post-modernism tells us that it is futile to make one set of events superior in importance to another set of events. It also breaks down the pseudo-boundaries and artificial differences between such realities as art and entertainment, history and psychology, sociology and political science.
Dave: You mean there are no rules? No methods? Anything goes? We've seen that before, Jim, as in the cultural relativism of William Graham Sumner, or in the political aesthetics of the Frankfurt School, or for that matter in the perspectivism of Friedrich Nietzsche. It seems to me that post-modernism has been with us a very long time indeed!

Jim: What about the current role reversal of teacher and student, or of oppressor and oppressed? Since I've been teaching, Dave, I've seen exciting changes in the teaching of history. For instance, we try to teach now from the point of view of oppressed people rather than the point of view of the victorious oppressors.
Dave: Well, that is in fashion right now, and it's a refreshing change for some of us. Still, I think a good history class is to find out what happened, rather than to give a voice to oppressed minorities.

Jim: Facts are meaningless if they are detached from the plights of real people, often ones who were disadvantaged or exploited.

Dave: But students need to know what happened, whether or not the facts fit their own point of view. The respect for facts, especially ones which do not help our own arguments and points of view – this is what education is all about.

Jim: Venting feelings, repeating entrenched positions, and voicing perspectives not based on fact or not placed in historical perspective are really disservices to the educational process.
Dave: But feelings and facts go together and we need education of the heart and sensibilities as well as education of the thinking mind.

Jim: Isn't it our role in a democracy to prepare students for citizenship? History has a special role in making good voters, community members, jurors, future politicians . . .
Dave: I don't know whether it is more important to prepare them for individual success or for participation in civic life.

Jim: Students can't learn unless history is presented in ways that are relevant to them and to their ethnic groups.
Dave: But history cannot be morselized and balkanized into the stories of various ethnic groups, can it? There is a history that is common to all people, is there not?

Jim: In college, students are still young and pedagogy is as important as historical science. The immature student, especially, needs entertainment and motivation in the classroom.
Dave: I think that historical methodology is always more important than teaching methods. Worrying about classroom discipline is something we shouldn't have to worry about in college. Sitting still and taking notes still have a place in the classroom

Jim: We need to make our teaching relate to students where they are, so to speak, right now.
Dave: I rather think that we need to prepare them for upper division courses and for history as it is taught and learned in universities.

Jim: At our community college level, the way history is learned is more important than the way it is taught. The student is the focus of our concern; he or she should be an active learner. Students are the best teachers of one another. The way we teach is often a hindrance to the learning process.
Dave: The new jargon in higher education has taken you in, Jim. The quickest way to effective learning is to have a well-prepared teacher in a classroom. The way to show respect for students is to have them exposed to well-prepared teachers, not thrown to founder in discussions with other ill-prepared students.

Jim: Technology is making a difference. We are not training people to sit passively in classrooms. We are training them to interact with vast resources of information over the Internet and World Wide Web. They don't depend on the teacher for their information any more, Dave

Dave: Look, Jim, if they don't read a textbook, they're not going to read what comes over the Internet. Have a little common sense, Jim. They wont be able to tell the good stuff from electronic garbage unless they already know a good deal about the topic. They need guidance, Jim, and the teachers are the guides.

Jim. *Concedo. Nollo contendere.*
Dave: But don't give up your point too soon. The librarians around here are on the cutting edge of change. They have already felt the changeover from the dominance of the print medium to the dominance of the electronic medium.

Jim: What's needed most in education is imagination, not educational jargon or even new technologies.
Dave: Oh yeah, remember Whitehead was against "inert ideas." "Inert ideas" were ideas that had been taught for a long time, but without pizzaz, without vigor. Imagination is the constant combination and recombination of ideas which are old and new. History is deadly if not taught with imagination.

Jim: What is imagination?
Dave: Can't say exactly. It's not a single mental faculty. It's a combination of mental processes, mixed with emotion and excitement. Whitehead calls it "the adventure of ideas." You can see it in younger teachers like Mark and Hugo.

Jim: Wow! Dave, I often thought that you might have better spent your career at a four-year school, a liberal arts college with a select student body. Perhaps you would have done more writing and found the students more stimulating.
Dave: Jim, we academics are all fortunate to have whatever jobs we do have. You yourself would do well presenting the Civil War to graduate students at a major university. Day after day, here at PCC, we are able to immerse ourselves in our subjects, even though the mechanics of basic-level teaching is admittedly a grind at times.

Jim: and we don't have to read and direct long theses and dissertations
Dave: which go on for months and years in the writing and revising
Jim: with disagreements among colleagues that are sometimes ugly and caustic
Dave: on topics that are precious, contrived or hardly relevant at all!

Jim: Without being smug, I can say that we two have done well in having found a scholarly life that is moderately well-paid and definitely a service to others.
Dave: Even though one is not overwhelmed here with attention and adulation, we would have to say it feels worthwhile.

Jim: Too bad the bricks in the wall do not feel the sense of worthwhileness of which we speak.
Dave: Too bad the bricks cannot speak of all that we have spoken of as worthwhile.